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AUTHOR Rose, Shirley K
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ABSTRACT

A study explored literacy myths of the academic culture as expressed by college writing students, examining shared literacy myths about the acquisition and uses of literacy, how beliefs influence literacy acquisition, and how cultural roles determine literacy experiences. Students were asked to write autobiographical accounts of their literacy acquisition, which were interpreted using methodology grounded in Kenneth Burke's language philosophy. Examination of the 200-plus personal narratives collected revealed that these autobiographies offered key insights into culturally shared assumptions about the nature of literacy. Because they were self-reflexive, these narratives transformed contextual elements of beginning literacy into textual elements. The narratives shared a common macrotext, which could be divided into (1) acquisition of literacy skills, (2) practice of literacy, (3) awareness of one's literacy, and (4) awareness of the uses of literacy. Theoretically this recursive activity is never-ending, since the last stage leads again to the first--further acquisition of literacy skills. A writer progresses through each of these stages within the context of a particular culture's literacy practices, which are determined by the culture's shared values and established power relations. Boys and girls interpret the literacy experience differently, and recognizing such differences is essential to understanding the literacy practices of any group. More often than not, the male myth represents literacy as a means of achieving autonomy, while in the female myth it is a means of participation. (Two essays illustrating male and female responses, a sample writing assignment, and references are appended.) (MKA)

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS REPRESENTATIVE ANECDOTE: A BURKEAN PARADIGM FOR RESEARCH ON LITERACY CULTURES

a paper presented at
the Conference on College Composition and Communication

In my seventh year of teaching college writing I realized I didn't understand my students. I realized they were different from me--they had a set of values and beliefs about education and about reading and writing that were different from my own.

That realization became the first step in a still on-going attempt at understanding--my research on literacy myths of the academic culture.

I set out in search of answers to these questions:

What are the shared literacy myths of our culture?

How do we believe literacy is acquired? What uses do we believe literacy has?

How might these beliefs influence our acquisition of literacy?

How do our cultural roles determine our literacy experiences?

and a final question: How could I proceed to find answers to these questions? What research design was best suited to my purpose?

Many composition researchers have turned to naturalistic and ethnographic methods in order to understand cultural, social, and environmental contexts for learning to read and write. But I had not been trained in the traditions of anthropology which provide the model for this research methodology. However, with my

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background and training in rhetorical criticism, narrative theory, and discourse analysis received in traditional English departments, I was (and am) well-trained as a reader and interpreter of written discourse .

I chose a literacy research methodology which would allow me to use that training to conduct research on the values and practices of the academic literacy culture. Grounded in Kenneth Burke's language philosophy, employing terms from his dramatistic theory, my method examines autobiographical narratives of the acquisition of literacy. These literacy autobiographies provide the data I need for systematic assessment of individual lives in relation to the group. For they establish, through narrative, a continuity of behavior that synthesizes biological, environmental, societal, and cultural elements. I have chosen to examine these autobiographical accounts of the acquisition of literacy, not because I expect to find verifiable truths about the process of acquiring literacy, but because they can offer key insights into culturally shared assumptions about the nature of literacy--about how and why we learn to read and write. (See Appendix for the text of the instructions students writers were given for writing their narratives.)

These autobiographical narratives, because they are self-reflexive, transform contextual elements of learning to read and write into textual elements. In autobiography, writers represent their societies' shared cultural myths--those images that give philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life--because they use these myths to explain their experience and interpret their

lives. Indeed those cultural myths have so shaped the writers' language that they cannot escape retelling the myths even if they mean to distort or misrepresent. Reading autobiographical narratives from many members of a group makes these myths all the more apparent, identifiable, and amenable to my systematic analysis.

The narratives share a common macrotext:

> I acquired literacy skills. Then I was able to use these skills. As I used these skills I became aware that I possessed them. This awareness led me to an awareness that I could use my literacy to achieve certain purposes. Realizing literacy was of use, I furthered my skills. As I increased my skills, I had more occasion for using them . . .

Because narrative is lineal, this version of the macrotext for stories of acquiring literacy necessarily presents the activity as a lineal process. An abstract version of this macrotext, presented in Figure 1, reflects the essentially recursive nature of the activity of learning to read and write, breaking the activity into four distinct phases. The first phase I call the acquisition of literacy skills, learning the conventions for encoding and decoding written discourse. This phase is followed by the practice of literacy, actually reading and writing. The practice of literacy leads to the third phase, an awareness of one's literacy. And this awareness leads to the fourth stage of the recursive activity, the awareness of the uses of literacy.

Figure 1

Stages of the Recursive Activity of Becoming Literate

This recursive activity is theoretically a never-ending one--the fourth stage, awareness of the uses of literacy, leads again to the first, further acquisition of literacy skills.

A writer progresses through each of these stages within the context of a particular culture's literacy practices-- practices determined by the culture's shared values and established power relations. So, for example, while little boys and little girls go through the same recursive phases of the activity, what they experience and the ways they interpret that experience will differ according to the culture's shared myths about literacy and its myths about the differences between boys and girls. Recognizing such differences is essential to understanding the literacy practices of any group.

To illustrate this point in the following discussion, I have provided two narratives which exemplify the differences in what I have identified as the male and female literacy myths (See Appendix). I have selected the two narratives presented here from among over two hundred narratives I have collected from students in my own and two other colleagues' freshman composition

classes. Just as each of the two hundred narratives is what Kenneth Burke calls a "representative anecdote" (Grammar of Motives) from the many stories of experience the student might have told, my choice of each of these two narratives has been based on its value as an anecdote representative of the wider sample. Dona's essay (see Appendix) is representative of the female myth of literacy as a means of participation. Brian's essay is representative of the male myth of literacy as a means of achieving autonomy. I have organized my analysis of these two according to the successive phases of becoming literate outlined above. The scheme in Figure 2 summarizes this analysis.

(Please note that I am not claiming that these differences are true of all men and all women. There are, however, two distinct--perhaps contrdicatory, perhaps complementary-- myths. In my readings of these narratives, I have found that the myth of participation is represented by females more often than not, while the myth of autonomy is represented by males more often than not. If readers would rather not think of these as gender-determined differences, I suggest that they read my use of the terms "male" and "female" as metaphors for these two myths.)

Figure 2

Differences between Female and Male Students' Narratives:

FEMALE--myth of participation	MALE--myth of autonomy
acquisition of skills: focus on process and cooperative effort	focus on measurable results; individual achievement
practice of literacy: participation with others; shared experience	solitary activity; comparison of achievement against others
awareness of literacy: own or others' expression of surprise, praise	achievement of goal set by self or others
awareness of uses of literacy: a way to please; hopes for gaining an audience	a way to satisfy expectations; hopes for gaining control over self and others

The activity of becoming literate is fundamentally the same for males and females, but the myths they use to understand and explain their experiences at each stage of the process are different. Thus a boy's experiences may reinforce his myth of literacy for autonomy while a girl's experiences may reinforce her myth of literacy for participation.

In describing the first phase of the activity of becoming literate, the narratives of the college women I have read emphasize the give-and-take between teacher and learner, and relate the way a teacher--whether a school teacher, parent, or sibling--helped them and how they responded to the teacher's encouragement. When male students describe this first phase of the activity of becoming literate, they usually focus on their

individual achievement. Teachers and parents are presented as authorities who explain the rules and establish expectations which must be met.

When women students relate accounts of their literacy practice, they present it in terms of their participation with others--whether participation in family activities, in class at school, or in a circle of friends. The male student writers I have studied rarely make reference to others when they give accounts of their reading and writing practices. Instead, they usually portray themselves as solitary, and when they do mention others it is in order to compare their efforts against those of others.

In narratives focussed on moments in which they became aware of their newly acquired literacy, women writers usually tell of receiving recognition and praise from others--parents, teachers, or friends. Many treat this as a moment of surprise--as though they had never expected it or even sought it. In narratives dramatizing awareness of their literacy, male writers are more likely to describe moments when they achieved a goal they had set for themselves or that had been set for them.

The final phase of acquiring literacy, becoming aware of the uses of literacy, also receives different treatment from female writers and male writers. Women relate stories about using their literacy to fulfill their desire to please. When they look ahead to further development of their literacy, women writers usually emphasize their hopes for gaining an audience and sharing ideas. Male student writers tell stories of using their literacy to satisfy expectations and requirements of them. They

are more likely to relate their hopes for attaining more control over their lives and being able to influence others.

At each of the stages, it is not the literacy activities themselves but the female students' interpretation and representation of these activities which differ from that of male students. For example, while a female student is just as likely as a male student to mention having participated in a reading contest sponsored by the local library, she is more likely to say how much she enjoyed it while the male is more likely to mention that he was one of the winners.

While I would like to explore with you the implications of my study, at this point I believe it is more important to instead examine its epistemological foundations. I will be discussing the way Kenneth Burke's dramatistic philosophy, theory, and methodology explain my research--my project of understanding.

Some of my readers may identify my act as a defense of my work. But I hope you will instead (or also) read my act as an invitation. I am inviting you to consider a way of investigating the cultural contexts and social construction of literacy. I will present what I call a Burkean paradigm for research on literacy cultures--the dramatistic design for research.

Burke's project in A Grammar of Motives was to give an account of human relations. Having defined man as a symbol-using animal, Burke had to choose for his analysis an example of human use of language from which he could develop an appropriate terminology for discussing his analysis. This example, or

representative anecdote, was the drama, which provided him with a set of terms--the Pentad (or Hexad)--for analyzing symbolic action.

The well-chosen representative anecdote employs a terminology (or set of terms or definitions) that is both a reflection of reality and a selection of reality. Insofar as this terminology reflects reality, it has scope; insofar as it is selective, it is a reduction. The concern then is that this scope and reduction be suited to the subject matter it was designed to describe, for the selection of a set of terms is a selection of a definition or a circumference.

Every circumference is a reduction--in other words, every definition or choice of terms is a reduction of the nonverbal to the verbal. The reduction of one terminology to another terminology ("X in terms of Y" or "X and Y") is a metaphor. If this reduction results in a narrowing or lessening--that is, if the scope and reduction are in contrast) the metaphor or trope is the metonym. If the scope and reduction are equal, the metaphor is a synecdoche.

Metonymic anecdotes cannot be representative anecdotes because the greater should not be considered in terms of the lesser. An anecdote, to be truly representative, must be synecdochic--it must be a "part for the whole, the whole for the part, the container for the thing contained, the cause for the effect, the effect for the cause, etc" (324 Grammar). Both members of the synecdochal pairs belong in the same associational cluster.

In selecting drama as his representative anecdote for symbolic action, Burke met the requirements of both scope and

reduction, for the vocabulary developed in conformity with drama--the pentad of act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose (or the hexad, if we add attitude)--had a systematically integrated structure and allowed for discussing human affairs in such typically human terms as "personality" or "role" and "action."

To summarize, in Burke's terms, "if one does not select a representative anecdote as an introductory form, in conformity with which to select and shape his analysis, one cannot expect to get representative terms" (324 Grammar). The well-chosen or truly representative anecdote makes possible a useful terminological analysis--or critique of symbolic action or poetry--any work of imaginative or critical cast (including autobiographical narratives).

The autobiographical narratives my students have written about their experience of becoming literate are representative anecdotes. These narratives are synecdochal in that composing autobiographical accounts of the acquisition of literacy is itself a literate act--action symbolic of literacy practice. It is self-reflexive.

Burke has noted, in Language as Symbolic Action, that all symbolic action is self portraiture. For autobiographical narratives, this is explicitly so.

As symbolic action, the autobiographical narrative is also self-constructive, for "by the incorporation of [the] social idioms we build ourselves, our personalities" (112 Philosophy). The individual not only builds himself by employing the shared language of our culture, he also builds "his symbolic bridges

between his own unique combination and the social pattern with relation to the social pattern" (289 Attitudes).

Thus, in Burke's terms, the autobiographical narrative is not subjective, for, like any work of critical or imaginative cast, it has universal relevance. The critical or imaginative work adopts strategies for encompassing situations--strategies which size up the situation and name their structure. These situations are real and the strategies have public content. Because the situations overlap from individual to individual, the strategies have universal relevance.

For Burke, the selection of an appropriate representative anecdote was the critical first step of a method for analyzing symbolic action. In Philosophy of Literary Form, he articulates and elaborates on subsequent steps. Burke notes that any critic's perspective implicitly selects a set of questions, which are of two kinds: (1) what to look for and why (ontological questions); (2) how, when and where to look for it (methodological questions). The dramatistic critic looks first for dramatic alignment. This dramatic alignment can be found by watching for what goes with what (equations) and for what leads to what (from what to what). These equations are discovered inductively by "statistical" inspection of the objective structure of the work. The dramatistic critic looks for critical points or watershed moments--beginnings, endings, and those moments where some new quality enters. Finally, the dramatistic critic looks for the underlying imagery.

Looking for dramatic alignment, watershed moments, and

underlying imagery establishes the connection between the structural relations and the function of a work for its writer and its reader. Because the approach emphasizes the act, form and content are integrated.

It is by asking the dramatistic critic's questions in my analysis of many literacy autobiogrphies that I was able to discover some of our cultural myths for the acquisition of literacy and to derive the paradigmatic narrative.

The autobigraphical narrative meets the requirements to be a representative anecdote for literate action. I have shown you the dramatic alignments and watershed moments I found when I sought to discover the shared literacy acquisition myths of the academic culture. And I have described the differences I found between male and female students' representative anecdotes of experiences in learning to read and write.

This dramatistic research design has allowed me to find some answers to my questions about the social and cultural factors of acquiring literacy. My research has helped me to understand my students. And it has helped them in understanding what being literate means in the academic culture. For in writing their literacy autobiographies, these students take their turns in the unending conversation of literate people.

Appendix

The text of the instructions student writers were given for writing an autobiographical narrative of the acquisition of literacy:

> Do you remember learning to read and write? Write a narrative dramatizing one or more episodes from your experience of learning to read and/or write.

Appendix (cont.)

Narrative Representative of the Female Myth of Literacy for Participation:

DONA

"How I Learned to Read and Write"

I remember one incident from when I was younger. The extent of my reading and writing career was still short. Bound and determined, I sat down with my sister's "Dick and Jane" book and read. I continued to read, and read. I read all day, and finished all one hundred or more pages. My pride and my sister's pride were boiling over that day. History had been made. My first book was finished. I had read the entire story without giving up to boredom or frustration.

I have to admit that my first story was not conquered without any wounds on my part. I must have stopped reading, twice every page, to ask my sister how to pronounce the longer words, which I thought were a different language.

That was my first reading experience. I guess, as you learn to read, you also learn to write. Spelling and general grammer are learned, but my first experience of actually writing something came when I was in the fourth grade. By saying writing, I mean creating something. I mean pulling ideas from my head and putting them onto paper. That experience was when I wrote a poem for my mother. It said something about her living in a big house, being beautiful, and not being afraid of a mouse. The reaction I received from her made me truly enjoy writing.

I learned to read because it was a challenge. I learned to write because when I did I influenced people's feelings and thoughts. The idea of being able to create something from nothing, and having the power to get people thinking, fascinated me.

Appendix (cont.)

Narrative Representative of the Male Myth of Literacy for Autonomy:

BRIAN

"How I learned to read and write"

Unlike many other students my education didn't begin until the very end of the second grade. My father was given a job overseas in Brazil. When we finally got settled into the social aspect of a foreign country I realized that it wasn't for me.

I started off going to school regularly. But as time wore on I began to skip classes. I confided in my mother and told her what I had been doing and how I felt about the schooling I was receiving. Foolishly she agreed with me and told me that I no longer had to attend. She said she was planning on leaving the country anyhow.

We arrived in the United States in the middle of my second grade year. My mother immediately enrolled me in the second grade. Within a couple of days the school had contacted my mother and told her that I should be placed back into first grade due to my inability to read and write.

My mother and I discussed this major decision at length. We both decided that it would be rough on me psychologically being so old and not being able to be with friends my own age. So my mom asked what she could do to help get me back on tract.

By the end of my second grade year I was in the highest reading group. With the help of my mother and my second grade teacher I also excelled in my other areas of education.

When I reached highschool I was placed in all the advanced reading and writing competency classes. I received high grades in all of these subjects.

I guess I have become disallusioned. I thought that this great success would continue into the higher echalon of college. But I have come to realize quite the contrary. For the first time in my life I am being considered an average student in the area of English.

In this freshman English class we have turned in several in-class essays. I have always had a terrible time with in class essays. When I write, I write from the heart not from an English textbook. I sometimes get carried away and forget about fragments and comma splices. I always thought of these as mistakes that could be corrected in a final copy. But I guess I am not going to be able to show my imagination in writing anymore. I will have to resort to being "correct," and using "formal" grammar.

I hope to someday be able to be both correct and imaginative and not make any mistakes on an in class essay so I can once again be realized as a good writer.

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